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Global and regional issues

Outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)

Summary

The present document provides information on the preparations and outcome of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), held in Quito, Ecuador, from 17 to 20 October 2016.

It sets out the objectives of the New Urban Agenda and its implications for the Arab region. It also provides information on ESCWA contributions to regional preparations and its prospective role in the implementation of this Agenda from a social development perspective.

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Introduction

1. The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) was held in Quito, Ecuador, from 17 to 20 October 2016. It concluded with the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, which is an action-oriented document intended to guide the next 20 years of sustainable urban development.

2. Habitat III was the first United Nations global summit held after the adoption the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, and the adoption of a new climate change agreement in December 2015 at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Habitat III thus offered a unique opportunity to discuss the important challenge of planning and managing cities, towns and villages, and their role as drivers of sustainable development.

3. The New Urban Agenda seta out a vision to make cities more inclusive and to optimize their role as drivers of economic growth and social development. The United Nations secretariat for Habitat III worked with various national, regional and global partners to formulate this new urban vision.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

4. The New Urban Agenda builds on the main messages of the Habitat Agenda issued at Habitat II (Istanbul, Turkey, 3-14 June 1996), which emphasized the notions of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements as drivers of development in an urbanizing world. In an inclusive and participatory process, the Agenda renews political commitments to sustainable urban development, assesses progress achieved over the last two decades since Habitat II, and identifies new and emerging challenges and priorities. These challenges are partly associated with the dramatic growth of the world's urban population, from 746 million in 1950 to 3.9 billion in 2014.[1] This rapid urbanization process is expected to continue: the world's urban population will reach 66 per cent of the total population by 2050, up from 54 per cent in 2014.[2]

5. The New Urban Agenda includes the Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All, which emphasizes the need to maximize "the opportunities of urbanization as an engine of sustained and inclusive economic growth, social, and cultural development, and environmental protection".[3] The Agenda also identifies major challenges to sustainable urbanization, including urban poverty and inequality; unemployment; inadequate housing; overburdening of basic urban infrastructure; considerable disparities between urban and rural areas; and the significant impact of urban agglomerations on human development, social cohesion, climate change and the environment.

6. These growing challenges call for collective action at all levels to ensure that cities promote economic growth and prosperity for their inhabitants and society, in an environmentally sustainable manner. Cities and towns can act as drivers of sustainable economic and social development provided that: inclusive and sustainable urban policies and programmes are put in place; the necessary commitments are made by all actors; and the actions agreed upon are implemented at the national, regional and global levels.

7. The implementation of the Agenda requires many actors, a variety of means, and an enabling environment. Capacity development, cooperation, mobilization of financial resources, and political and legal frameworks all form part of the overall means of implementation. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is recognized in the Agenda as a focal point for sustainable urbanization. It will take the lead in supporting the follow-up and review of the Agenda, and in monitoring its implementation in

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[1] *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights*, 2014. Available from https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf.

[2] Ibid.

[3] See www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/71/256.

collaboration with other United Nations system entities, particularly the regional commissions. It is also recognized that the New Urban Agenda's follow-up and review mechanisms should go hand in hand with those of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

II. ESCWA ROLE IN PREPARAING FOR HABITAT III

8. The Habitat III secretariat worked with various national, regional and global partners, including the United Nations regional commissions and other regional entities, such as the League of Arab States,[4] to formulate a new urban vision. The new agenda underwent several rounds of formal and informal discussions between stakeholders, United Nations experts and member States, before the final draft was adopted at Habitat III.

9. ESCWA, as part of the United Nations Task Team on Habitat III, was engaged throughout the entire preparatory process for Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda. ESCWA led the regional preparations, together with the UN-Habitat Regional Office for the Arab States (ROAS), including preparing a major Arab regional report. ESCWA was represented at the highest level at the Habitat III Conference, and its delegation actively participated in the Conference's events.

10. The role of United Nations regional commissions in preparing for Habitat III was recognized by the General Assembly in resolutions 67/216, 68/239 and 69/226; by ECOSOC in resolution 2012/27; and by the Governing Council of UN-Habitat in resolution 24/14, thus highlighting the regional dimension. In these resolutions, the five regional commissions are requested to contribute to each stage of the preparatory process, by preparing regional reports, contributing to a global outcome document, convening regional consultative meetings, and utilizing their regular sessions to provide inputs to the process and prospective commitments to the New Urban Agenda.

11. In line with these mandates, ESCWA actively supported the preparatory process for Habitat III, both regionally and globally, and led a regional consultative process to develop the regional messages included in the above-mentioned regional report, which contributed to the global process of formulating the Agenda.

III. TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE OF URBANIZATION IN THE ARAB REGION

12. The goals of inclusion, resilience, safety, prosperity and sustainability are critical to the development of Arab cities and the Arab region as a whole, which is undergoing rapid population growth. In 2010, 56 per cent of the population of Arab countries (estimated at 357 million) lived in cities. By 2050, the total population of Arab countries is forecast to increase to 646 million people, 68 per cent of whom will live in cities.[5] The urban population in Arab countries grew four-fold between 1970 and 2010, and will more than double between 2010 and 2050.

13. The Arab region is experiencing the natural transformative force of urbanization. Many Arab countries have embarked on successful urban development plans and projects, sometimes as part of national development planning strategies,[6] to meet rising demand for housing and urban services and facilities, and to provide necessary urban infrastructure to service growth and development. However, the process of

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[4] The League of Arab States, in cooperation with other regional and national partners, has developed the Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030, launched at Habitat III. ESCWA is collaborating with the League and UN-Habitat (ROAS) on implementing the strategy, in line with the New Urban Agenda and SDG11.

[5] United Nations Human Settlements Programme., *The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition*, 2012 Available from https://unhabitat.org/books/the-state-of-arab-cities-2012-challenges-of-urban-transition.

[6] See, for example, ESCWA, *Bridging the Urban Divide in the ESCWA Region: Towards Inclusive Cities*, 2011; and UN-Habitat, *The State of Arab Cities 2012: Challenges of Urban Transition*, 2012.

urbanization in several Arab countries is accelerated and complicated by conflict, crises and massive displacement and migration, posing considerable added challenges.

14. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the region is witnessing globally unprecedented rates of refugees and displaced persons, mainly in connection with recent conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab republic and Yemen.[7] Cities and towns in both conflict and neighbouring countries have struggled to accommodate the influx of millions of refugees and displaced persons, coupled with insufficient means to provide them with housing and other social services. The last few decades have also witnessed unprecedented growth in informal settlements, including in urban peripheries and encroachment on agricultural land, which sometimes threaten the environment and natural resources, exacerbate water scarcity and overburden already strained urban infrastructure.[8] Other challenges have also arisen, including issues related to employment, equity, equality, sustainability, decent and adequate housing, and the lack of public spaces.

15. A new consensual approach to housing and urban development is therefore much needed in the Arab region to address increasing urban challenges, and to meet the needs and aspirations of its peoples in terms of inclusiveness, sustainability, social cohesion and prosperity.

IV. ESCWA PROSPECTIVE ROLE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW OF THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

16. Following the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, United Nations member States and stakeholder organizations, led by UN-Habitat, were invited to determine necessary actions for achieving sustainable urban development, while anchoring the New Urban Agenda in the 2030 Agenda.[9] SDG 11 specifically addresses cities and human settlements, with particular emphasis placed on the need to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. It emphasizes universal access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services; the provision of sustainable transport systems; and slum upgrading. SDG 11 also calls for inclusive and integrated urban planning and management, and for measures to protect cultural and natural heritage. In addition, it aims to reduce adverse urban environmental impacts, with special emphasis on air quality and waste management. It further calls for universal access to green and public spaces, with a focus on vulnerable social groups including persons with disabilities.

17. ESCWA, together with UN-Habitat and other regional and global partners, is currently working on detailing the interlinkages between the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda. Available analysis and current discussions focus on the synergies and points of alignment in implementation and outcome processes.[10] Ten SDGs are directly or indirectly linked to SDG 11, and to 30 per cent of its targets and 39 per cent of its indicators.[11]

18. Both the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda foresee a pivotal regional role for the achievement of the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda. Increasingly, regional and subregional country

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[7] The numbers of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees (refugees and IDPs) and stateless persons of concern to UNHCR registered by the end of 2014 were approximately 11.6 million Syrians, 4.1 million Iraqis, 2.9 million Sudanese and 2.3 million Somalis. These fall under the concern of UNHCR, whereas Palestinian refugees and IDPs fall under the responsibility of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). See UNHCR, *Forced Displacement in 2014- UNHCR Global Trends*, 2014, pp. 49-52. Available from www.unhcr.org/statistics/country/556725e69/unhcr-global-trends-2014.html.

[8] ESCWA, Urbanization and Sustainable Development in the Arab Region, *Social Development Bulletin*, vol. 5, No. 4, 2015. Available from www.unescwa.org/publications/social-development-bulletin-urbanization-sustainable-development-arab-region.

[9] A/RES/70/1.

[10] See Cities Alliance, Sustainable Development Goals and Habitat III: Opportunities for a Successful New Urban Agenda, 2015.

[11] Ibid.

groupings are being requested to identify solutions to their common development challenges, and regional institutions are called upon to work collectively with member States to develop regional strategies and approaches. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda notes the importance of inclusive regional follow-up and review processes and encourages the regional commissions to support United Nations member States in these processes. The New Urban Agenda also refers to United Nations regional and subregional collaboration with all levels of government, for an "inclusive, multilevel, participatory and transparent follow-up and review of the New Urban Agenda".[12]

19. In resolution 67/290, the General Assembly decided that the first meeting of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development would have a thematic focus, reflecting the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. Resolution 70/299 states that the theme of the 2018 Forum shall be "Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies". This resolution also provides that the Forum, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, "shall discuss a set of Goals and their interlinkages, including, if appropriate, with other Goals, at each session representing the three dimensions of sustainable development, with a view to facilitating an in-depth review of progress made on all Goals over the course of a four-year cycle, with means of implementation, including with respect to Goal 17, reviewed annually". For 2018, the SDGs to be reviewed in-depth include Goal 11 on human settlements, as well as Goal 6 on water and sanitation, Goal 7 on energy, Goal 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns, and Goal 15 on terrestrial ecosystems.

20. ESCWA is well positioned to work with its member States on extending support for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and SDG 11. It is already entrusted by its member States to help integrate the SDGs into their national plans by providing the necessary regional platforms to facilitate coordination, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.[13]

21. ESCWA will provide support to its member States in implementing the New Urban Agenda, including on issues pertinent to social inclusion, urban poverty reduction, equity and equality, housing and slum upgrading and on key environmental and economic issues, while aligning the outcomes to the 2030 Agenda goals and targets. In doing so, ESCWA will benefit from its already established mandates, make use of its global and regional knowledge platforms, and develop synergies. However, it will require a strengthened mandate to assist Arab countries in fully implementing the New Urban Agenda.

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[12] A/RES/71/256, para. 162; and A/RES/70/1.

[13] See Doha Declaration on the Implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially paragraph 27 detailing the type of support needed.